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AUTHOR Jones, Donald C.
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ABSTRACT

The issue of agency bedevils contemporary composition theorists and practitioners. In theory, scholars such as Lester Faigley, James Berlin, and Patricia Bizzell have critiqued the foundation priority of thought to language, yet their emphasis on language has cast disturbing doubts on the origins of an individual's thoughts. In practice, the postmodern emphasis on social discourses has created some troubling assumptions about what composition students can and should do with language. Pragmatic philosophy begins with the principle known as the primacy of experience. An individual can develop knowledge from experience according to John Dewey's principle: the constructive process of knowing. Deweyan pragmatism is being practiced by writing process advocates such as Peter Elbow and Donald Murray who have been often labeled as atheoretical practitioners. The pragmatist rationale for many of Elbow's and Murray's most effective pedagogical practices reflect the relevance of Deweyan pragmatism to the postmodern impasse of agency. (Contains 3 notes and 13 references.) (CR)

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A Pragmatic Reconstruction of the Postmodern Impasse: The Resounding Relevance of John Dewey's Tacit Tradition

Donald C. Jones

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"The effect of the pragmatist move . . . is not to disconfirm the subject but to reconfirm it." -- Giles Gunn

The issue of agency bedevils contemporary composition theorists and practitioners. In theory, Lester Faigley, James Berlin, and Patricia Bizzell have critiqued the foundational priority of thought to language, yet their emphasis on language has cast disturbing doubts upon the origins of an individual's thoughts. Faigley, for example, warns, when a writer is situated "among many competing discourses that precede" him or her, this subject's "control [of] its location and moves within a discourse" becomes "problematic" (226-27). If a writer is someone subjected to prior discourses, then his or her agency is called into question. The postmodern emphasis on language reduces the subject to a discursive object -- or in Faigley's words: "an effect rather than a cause of discourse" (9). Subjectivity becomes a debilitating pun, and agency, an illusion. Postmodernism, Faigley admits, "has not . . . produced a broad theory of agency" so he refers to this problem as an "impasse," for it has led to a theoretical dead end (39, 20).

In practice, the postmodern emphasis on social discourses has created some troubling assumptions about what composition students can, and should do, with language. Some instructors, like Faigley, try to enact their students' inscription by language, but they sometimes accept this inscription without requiring their students to question it sufficiently. Other instructors, such as Berlin, want their students to resist the dominant discourses, but they demand such absolute resistance that most students instead reject this revolutionary demand and reaffirm the dominant culture. When Berlin, for example, "asks students to deconstruct the dominant ideologies on relations between the sexes,"

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Bizzell observes, they instead "hold firmly to the ideologies they are supposed to question. [Male and female students] defend prostitution as a woman's right to make money any way she sees fit" ("Beyond" 670). In Faigley's and Berlin's postmodern courses, their emphasis upon language does not foster the critical examination of discursive influences upon which their students' agency depends.

As Rebecca Howard poses the postmodern question of agency in a recent *College English* review essay, I believe she inadvertently suggests a solution as well. She asks, "Can writers control their writing processes or are their writing processes -- and . . . the writers themselves -- constructed by their cultural settings?" (349). Let me repeat the postmodern question: "Can writers control their writing processes or are their writing processes -- and . . . the writers themselves -- constructed by their cultural settings?" As soon as I read this question, I thought of John Dewey. Let me explain. In *Experience and Education*, Dewey begins with the warning that we like "to think in terms of extreme opposites," we are "given to formulating [our] beliefs in terms of Either-Ors" (17, italics original). I believe Dewey's pragmatic philosophy can help us avoid the current dilemma of assuming *either* thought is prior to language as foundationalists claim *or* discourse is prior to knowledge as postmodernists contend.

Dewey disrupts this dichotomy because pragmatism involves more than a binary opposition between knowledge and language. Dewey instead theorizes a series of dynamic relationships between knowledge, language, and experience. He acknowledges not only language's influence upon knowledge and experience, but also their equal influence upon language. Deweyan pragmatism also creates a new theoretical context for the most effective practices of Peter Elbow's writing process pedagogy so we can teach our students to be the agents of ideas without ever letting them imagine they are the sole authors of these thoughts.

Pragmatic philosophy begins with the principle known as the primacy of experience. For Dewey, neither knowledge, nor language, but experience should be "the starting point

of philosophic thought" (*EN* 11). 1 Along with William James, Dewey considers experience to be an individual's interactions, or better yet - transactions, with the material and social environment. According to James' famous phrase, experience is a continuous "stream of consciousness" (*Principles* 1: 238). As an individual experiences this stream, she first undergoes an event; experiences initially are had and only later are they known.

An individual can develop knowledge from experience according to Dewey's next principle: the constructive process of knowing. An individual begins to develop knowledge from experience when he notices the "felt difficulty" of a physical need, an emotional desire, or an intellectual curiosity (*How* 107). The creative tension of a felt difficulty makes a knower try to define the problem through exploratory activity. The problem is defined by relating some, apparently significant qualities; then a knower tries to form a hypothesis that can be tested through deliberate experimentation. Through such testing, knowledge not only develops from experience, but also returns to experience for verification. The actual practice of this constructive process, of course, is never as orderly as the neat description of its components: felt difficulty, problem definition, hypothesis formation, deliberate experimentation, and provisional verification. Nor does this process ever occur in isolation, the present construction always rests upon previous assumptions so it is really a reconstructive process.

I realize that pragmatic philosophy may seem very abstract and removed from contemporary composition studies, but, fortunately, Deweyan pragmatism is already being practiced by some unlikely figures. I am referring to Peter Elbow and other writing process advocates like Donald Murray as unlikely figures because they too often are labeled as atheoretical practitioners (North 22). And when critics ascribe a theory to their practices, it usually is the so-called 'expressivism' of a naive, neo-Romanticism. Yet there's an important reconsideration of Elbow and Murray underway. At the peak of the writing process movement in the late 1970's, Janet Emig declared, "John Dewey is everywhere in our work," and Thomas Newkirk, Louise Wetherbee Phelps, Stephen Fishman, and David

Russell each have articulated what Emig termed the "tacit tradition" of Deweyan pragmatism within writing process theories (150). I want to make Dewey's tacit tradition resound in its relevance so we can overcome the postmodern impasse of agency.

In his book *more than stories,* Newkirk explains that the writing process approach implements many of Dewey's principles, such as the primacy of experience and the constructive process of knowing (206). Let me quickly add a few examples from Elbow's composition theory because I consider his to be the most complete practice of pragmatism. Elbow upholds the primacy of experience through his emphasis on non-academic discourse that renders in contrast to David Bartholomae's concentration on academic discourse that explains. Elbow values writing that "convey[s] what [students] see when [they] look out a window . . . that conveys to others a sense of their experience" ("Reflections" 136). He values this experiential writing because he believes "discourse that renders often yields important . . . insights such as helping us see an exception or a contradiction" ("Reflections" 137). Rendering these felt difficulties can stimulate the development of more knowledge from experience. 2 Like Dewey, Elbow considers knowledge to be a "process of interpretation" from experience (*Embracing* 298). He identifies the two fundamental forces of the constructive process of knowing; for Elbow, they are his believing and doubting games. The believing game does not seek immediately "to construct or defend an argument but rather to transmit [or enlarge] an experience" ("Shifting" 288). Believing supports creating, and doubting fosters criticizing by "drain[ing] the experience from an idea and see[ing] . . . its pure propositionality" (*Embracing* 263). The alternating forces of believing and doubting, of creating and criticizing propel a writer from the felt difficulty to the problem definition and later from the formed hypothesis to the deliberate experimentation of Dewey's constructive process.

The next principle of Deweyan pragmatism heralds the postmodern emphasis on language without reaching an impasse over agency. Dewey rejects the foundational belief that thought is "complete prior to language" (*EN* 141). Pragmatists do not conceive of

language as a neutral medium for self-expression because, as James explains, previously accepted beliefs have been "built into the very structure of language" ("Pragmatism" 85). Because of these built-in beliefs, experience, according to Dewey, is "saturated with the products of . . . past generations . . . . It is filled with interpretations [and] classifications . . . [that are] incorporated into what seems to be fresh [thought]" (*EN* 34). My three year old daughter has helped me understand this principle when I realized that she is not learning the names of foundational objects as she learns to use words like "girl." She instead is acquiring a past generation's assumptions about gender. She is becoming, as Dewey declares, "a sharer in the beliefs of those around [her]" (*Reconstruction* 42).

Although Dewey asserts, "the *ways* in which we believe and expect have a tremendous effect upon *what* we believe and expect," an individual does not have to be dominated by language (*EN* 15, italics original). Dewey readily acknowledges the influence of language when he asserts, "experience is dependent upon an extension of language" (*EN* 143). Yet, after asserting the dependence of experience upon language, he immediately stipulates in his next phrase, "[language] which is a social *product* and *operation* " (*EN* 143, italics added). By considering discourse as a social product *and* operation -- meaning a product and a process, Dewey creates the discursive space for individual agency.

Dewey conceives language as a process as well as a product because, like society, it "not only continues to exist by transmission . . . it may be fairly said to exist in transmission" (*Democracy* 5). Language, as a product, only exists in the process of its transmission between individual members of a society. During their continuation of language, individuals can achieve greater agency by reflexively considering its influence. Dewey likens this critical examination and reconstruction of our beliefs and ways of believing to

> intellectual disrobing. We cannot permanently divest ourselves of the intellectual habits we take on and wear . . . [from] the culture of our own

> time and place. But . . . we [can] take them off . . . [and] inspect them critically to see what they are made of and what wearing them does to us. (*EN* 35)

All of our beliefs cannot be cast off simultaneously, but separate beliefs may be foregrounded for examination. The postmodernists Berlin and Faigley themselves demonstrate this possible achievement of agency, for they have replaced the foundational term "individual" with "subject" to indicate their opposition to any assertion of autonomous agency (Berlin "Postructuralism" 18). And they have varied the meaning of subjectivity from the foundational notion of a personal perspective to the anti-foundational concept of prior discursive positions by asserting an individual has little control over her viewpoint (Faigley 227-8). They prove Dewey's assertion that, through language, all "events are subject to reconsideration and revision" because "their meanings may be infinitely combined and re-arranged in [the] imagination" of individuals (*EN* 138). Then the consequences of these specific ways of believing can be tested and compared upon the contextual background of other previously accepted assertions. Agency, within a pragmatist epistemology, can be achieved.

Although critics claim Elbow conceives of a writer as being "inner-directed" and seeking an "internal apprehension" of truth, this writing process theorist actually follows the pragmatist principles that permit the achievement of agency (Bizzell "Cognition" 215, Berlin "Contemporary" 771). In *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow acknowledges language's influence upon individual thinkers. He locates writers and readers in "speech communities" and warns, "the picture [of language] is oversimplified . . . if we talk of only *one* speech community" (155, italics original). Elbow's more complex image of "many overlapping speech communities for each individual" provides the discursive space for agency without ever denying Dewey's assertion of language's 'tremendous effect' (155). 3 Dewey declares, "Even a composition conceived in the head and, therefore, physically private, is public in its significant content" (*Art* 51). And Elbow elaborates,

"we can carry on thinking, writing, and even talking, while alone on a deserted island, but in doing so we are living off capital accumulated through a commun|al| process" (*Embracing* 293). These two quotations are so similar because Elbow's writing process theory is living off the pragmatist principles accumulated by Dewey and James, a debt he has begun to repay.

In "The Uses of Binary Thinking," Elbow identifies "John Dewey" by name as a philosopher who recognizes that "either/or thinking is the problem" in the controversy over whether writing is either an individual or a social process (60). He is well aware that others have concluded that an author is "written by language," but he does not because he maintains a Deweyan conception of the individual and the social ("Toward" 209). According to Elbow, there is a "constant tug of war" between individuals who create new meanings and social communities that "curb this looseness" (*Writing* 154). The process of individuals using language leads to subtle variation and stark invention, and the products maintained by a specific community limit this alteration and addition. Yet for neither Elbow, nor Dewey can the existing product of one discourse community completely control the continuing process of language use that makes individual agency possible.

Several of Elbow's most effective, yet often misunderstood, practices can be used to enact Dewey's theory of agency. Contrary to his critics, Elbow does not conceive of freewriting as a neo-Romantic act of self-expression. Freewriting, he instead states, -- and I'm quoting him -- "exploits the autonomous generative powers of language and syntax themselves" (*Embracing* 59). Yet as "words call up words, ideas call up more ideas" during freewriting, Elbow does not believe the writer must be the one ultimately exploited or controlled by social discourses (*Embracing* 59). Through the unplanned invention stimulated by freewriting, a writer may be able to disrupt as much as follow the dominant discourses because freewriting "unleashes the mind's capacity for chaos and disorganization" according to Elbow.

Even when freewriting conforms to conventional discourses, it exposes these ways

of believing to critical examination. Freewriting places discursive practices upon the page where they can be examined as "a string of assertions arranged in space" ("Shifting" 284). I, for example, ask my first-year composition students to freewrite about three words: "writing," "composing," and "experimenting" in order to foreground their assumptions about the first concept. The word "writing" too often functions as a synecdoche; one part - the transcription of letters and words represents the whole of composing so the more complex, experimental process of constructing meaning is obscured (Brodkey 398). Freewriting can function, as Elbow states, as both "an invitation to become less self-conscious about writing" and "to increase our awareness of what we have written" ("Toward" 210).

As taught by Elbow, peer response also can expose discursive influences to deliberate examination. When students write the common essay on abortion, for example, the reactions of peer responders to this topic can reveal the influential ways of believing that students often ignore. Peer responses that refer to 'the potential life of the fetus conceived' and 'the life of the unborn child' make manifest the point under contention *if* the writer considers these phrases to represent more than 'just someone else's opinion.' Then these responses can be considered as examples of Dewey's assertion that language's "condenses meanings that . . . presage social outlooks" (*Democracy* 46).

Elbow again supports Dewey's process of intellectual disrobing through his advocacy of the games of believing and doubting. In "The Shifting Relationship Between Speech and Writing," Elbow demonstrates, the greater agency that can be achieved by trying on and taking off assumptions that have been built into language. He initially tries on, or believes, the classical assumptions that speech is ephemeral and writing is indelible. Speech, he states, is ephemeral because it can be heard only once. Writing, in contrast, is indelible because it is recorded on the more permanent page. Elbow then takes off, or doubts, these assumptions. Speech can be considered indelible because once we have spoken, our words can never be retracted, only amended. Writing can be ephemeral if a

writer's first draft is not the final public one; with revision, print ceases to be permanent. Elbow then advocates revised freewriting because it combines the spontaneity and specificity of speech with the revisibility and reflexivity of writing. Although Elbow may seem to be deconstructing like Jacques Derrida a binary opposition between speech and writing, his analysis actually relies on Dewey's dialectical thinking, the pragmatist preference for maintaining the creative tension between both/and rather than eleiminating either one extreme or the other. Elbow has praised this dialectic of believing and doubting in theory, and he has advocated its practice by students in a course that examines "single concrete particular[s]" from "the widest range of conflicting models, metaphors, hypotheses, conceptual schemes and disciplines" (*Embracing* 241, 9).

Susan Jarrat thinks, "the innovations of teachers like Elbow and Murray" need to be relocated "in a different theoretical context," but I believe we need to look no further than Dewey's tacit tradition; it only needs to be articulated further (113). When we listen to the pragmatist rationale for many of Elbow's -- and I will add, Murray's -- most effective pedagogical practices, then we can hear the resounding relevance of Deweyan pragmatism to the postmodern impasse of agency. What finally excites me is that the supposed epistemological differences, raised by Berlin, between the writing process theories of Elbow and supposedly more social theories now disappear. When considered from a pragmatist perspective, Elbow's most effective practices and Anne Berthoff's double-entry journal and interpretive paraphrase activity, for example, can be combined in a pragmatist writing course. As we hear Dewey's resounding relevance, we can teach our students to achieve greater agency.

NOTES

1. Because of the similarity of Dewey's titles, I will refer to *Experience and Nature* as *EN* to distinguish it from *Experience and Education.*

2. Elbow's theory upholds the primacy of experience not only in its pedagogical practices, but also in its theoretical origins. To overcome his own severe case of writer's block, Elbow began to study his struggle to compose while a graduate student. In "Uses," he explains, "my thinking grew out of a process of trying to be true to my experience and to find a theory that didn't violate it" (65). Elbow makes explicit references to "William James and John Dewey" to explain this "epistemology of experience" (67). Then he connects this pragmatist

> emphasis on experience [to] the work of . . . Macrorie, Britton, Murray, myself, and others. What these figures had in common . . . was a burgeoning interest in the 'experience' of writing . . . . People wanted to talk about experience during the process of writing, not just the resultant text as product. 'Process' connotes experience. (66)

3. Although the explicit topic of Elbow's discussion of speech communities is the interpretive abilities of individual readers, his theory of their agency applies to writers as well.

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